

Formative Olmec

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The Olmec civilization thrived in what is now the present-day Gulf Coast of Mexico. They developed religious and artistic traditions that extended far and wide into ancient Mesoamerica during the Formative/pre-Classic period. The Olmec developed regal-ritual centers with main plazas, pyramids, and public spaces near naturally sacred places (e.g., springs, water sources, caves) so that the general population could congregate for ceremonial religious rituals. The Olmec practiced shamanism and had an organized priesthood. The Olmec elite, shamans, and priests were at the top of the social hierarchy and were in charge of maintaining their religious and cultural traditions. There have been six Olmec supernatural beings or deities identified by Mesoamerican scholars, and while their names are not known, they have been numbered I through VI and associated with natural phenomena including: sky, fertility, rain, earth, agriculture and maize. We know a lot about Olmec religion thanks to their impressive and unique artistic traditions, as well as from later Mesoamerican religious traditions that borrowed Olmec concepts, ideology, and iconography and turned these into their own religious traditions, such as the Maya society. Due to this, the Olmec has been described as the "Mother culture" of Mesoamerica and is known as the first organized religion in this particular region of the Americas.



Date Range: 1500 BCE - 400 BCE

Region: Gulf Coast of Mexico, Southeast Mexico

Region tags: Mexico

The extent of the Olmec civilization during the Formative period (1500-400 BCE).

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite

Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Coe, Michael D., and Richard A. Diehl, eds. 1995. *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership*. Princeton, N.J.
- Source 2: Sharer, Robert J., and David C. Grove, eds. 1989. *Regional Perspectives on the Olmec*. Cambridge, U.K.
- Source 3: Soustelle, Jacques. 1985. *The Olmecs: The Oldest Civilization in Mexico*. Norman, Okla.
- Source 1: Ortíz C., Ponciano, María del Carmen Rodríguez. 1999. Olmec Ritual Behavior at El Manatí: A Sacred Space. In "Social Patterns in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 9-10 October 1993", edited by David C. Grove and Rosemary A. Joyce, pp. 225-254. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC.
- Source 2: Clark, John E. and Arlene Colman. 2013. Olmec Things and Identity: A Reassessment of Offerings and Burials at La Venta, Tabasco. In "Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association" Vol. 23, Issue 1, pp. 14-37. DOI: 10.1111/apaa.12013

- Source 3: Rice, Prudence M. 2007. Middle and Late Preclassic: The Gulf Coast Olmec and Epi-Olmec. In "Maya Calendar Origins: Monuments, Mythistory, and the Materialization of Time", pp. 75-107. University of Texas Press.
- Source 1: Grove, David C. 1997. Olmec Archaeology: A Half Century of Research and Its Accomplishments. *Journal of World Prehistory* 11(1):151-201.
- Source 2: Stocker, Terry, Sarah Meltzoff, and Steve Armsey. 1980. Crocodilians and Olmecs. *American Antiquity* 45:740-758.
- Source 3: Taube, Karl. 1996. The Olmec Maize God: The Face of Corn in Formative Mesoamerica. *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 29/30:38-81.
- Source 1: Reilly III, F. Kent. 2012. Mesoamerican Religious Beliefs: The Practices and Practitioners. In "The Oxford Handbook of Mesoamerican Archaeology", edited by Deborah L. Nichols, pp. 1-12. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195390933.013.0057
- Source 2: Pool, Christopher. 2007. *Olmec Beginnings*. In "Olmec Archaeology and Early Mesoamerica", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. isbn: 9781139167147
- Source 3: Diehl, Richard. 2005. Olmec Religion. In "Encyclopedia of Religion", second edition, edited by Lindsay Jones, pp. 6817-6820. MacMillan Library Reference, Detroit.
- Source 1: Pohl, Mary E. D., Kevin O. Pope, and Christopher von Nagy. 2022. Olmec Origins of Mesoamerican Writing. *Science* 298:1984-1987.

Online sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: https://youtu.be/_ALlI5v08k
- Source 1 Description: Eduardo Matos Harvard Lecture by Professor Ann Cyphers titled "The Dawn of Olmec Civilization"
- Source 2 URL: <https://youtu.be/oYJxng6i4NQ>
- Source 2 Description: Reviving a 3,000-year-old Ancient Ballgame
- Source 3 URL: https://youtu.be/dh_nCuxRmb4
- Source 3 Description: The Olmec Colossal Heads with Ann Cyphers
Notes: Source 3 is a talk in Spanish
- Source 1 URL: <http://sapp.uv.mx/catalogomax/es-MX/Sala/1>
- Source 1 Description: Anthropology Museum of Xalapa
- Source 2 URL: <https://youtu.be/unayHy60ZnM>
- Source 2 Description: The History and Culture of the Olmec Civilization
Notes: There are Olmec artifacts displayed in the Patio 1, Patio 2, and Sala 1 within the catalogue at the Anthropology Museum of Xalapa.

General Variables

Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

– Yes

Notes: There would have been other cultural groups thriving in Mesoamerica around the same time. Olmec-style art has been recovered from multiple archaeological sites to the West and South of the Olmec heartland.

↳ Is the cultural contact competitive:

– I don't know

↳ Is the cultural contact accommodating/pluralistic:

– Yes

Notes: Most likely. There were multiple cultures thriving at the same time as the Olmec. There was trade and exchange happening between them so they may have been accommodating to some degree.

↳ Is the cultural contact neutral:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Is there violent conflict (within sample region):

– Yes

Notes: The Olmec sites were eventually destroyed and it seems that these violent actions happened within rather than due to violent conflict with other cultural Mesoamerican groups.

↳ Is there violent conflict (with groups outside the sample region):

– No

Notes: There is not much evidence of violent conflict during this period in Mesoamerica. As mentioned above, the Olmec sites were destroyed but it seems that these actions happened within rather than due to violent conflict with other cultural Mesoamerican groups.

Does the religious group have a general process/system for assigning religious affiliation:

– I don't know

Does the religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members:

– Field doesn't know

Does the religion have official political support

– Yes

Notes: Religion and politics were very much intertwined in Mesoamerican societies and would have been the case of the Olmec as well.

Is there a conception of apostasy in the religious group:

– Field doesn't know

Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

– Estimated population, numeric: 18000

Notes: This estimate is based on the largest regal-ritual centre of La Venta by 900 BCE. The total population estimate for all the archaeological sites associated with the Olmec is more difficult to estimate.

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (% of sample region population, numerical):

– Field doesn't know

Nature of religious group [please select one]:

– Large religious group (unknown relationship to other religious groups, or presence of other religious groups unknown)

Are there recognized leaders in the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: The Olmec elite, shamans and the priesthood were at the top of the social hierarchy and were the leaders of the Olmec religion and society.

↳ Is there a hierarchy among these leaders:

– Yes

↳ A single leader of a local community:

– No

Notes: There may have been multiple leaders in the form of a chiefdom.

↳ Multiple religious communities each with its own leader, no hierarchy among these leaders:

– Yes

Notes: Chiefs would have likely been in charge of their community.

↳ "Regional" leaders who oversee one or more local leader(s) (e.g. bishops):

– Field doesn't know

↳ A single leader for the religious group that oversees all other leaders in the sample region:

– No

↳ A council or group of leaders for the religious group that oversees all other leaders in the sample region:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: This is possible but it is hard to assert based on the archaeological evidence alone.

↳ Estimate how many levels there are in the hierarchy of religious leadership:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Are leaders believed to possess supernatural powers or qualities:

– Yes

Notes: The leaders experienced transformation and communication with the supernatural beings in specific ritual ceremonies, likely involving hallucinogenic substances.

↳ Powers are acquired by individual deeds carried out in past lives:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Powers are acquired by individual deeds carried out in the current life:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Powers are inherited:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Powers are culturally transmitted from a supernatural being:

– Yes

↳ Powers are culturally transmitted from another human (e.g. teacher):

– No

↳ Powers are associated with leadership office they assume:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Are religious leaders chosen:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Are leaders considered fallible:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Are close followers or disciples of a religious leader required to obediently and unquestionably accept the leader's pronouncements on all matters:

– Field doesn't know

Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also "oral scriptures" (e.g. the Vedas of India).

– No

Notes: None that have been recovered archaeologically.

Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

– Yes

↳ In the average settlement, what percentage of area is taken up by all religious monuments:

– I don't know

Notes: While I do not know the exact percentage, the Olmec developed regal-ritual centres where religious and public activities took place. As such, the majority of the buildings/monuments at these regal-ritual centres were built for religious purposes. The site of La Venta, for instance, was the largest regal-ritual centre covering two hundred hectares or five hundred acres (Rice 2007:81).

↳ Size of largest single religious monument, square meters:

– I don't know

↳ Height of largest single religious monument, meters:

– I don't know

Notes: Mound C, also known as "the Great Pyramid" at La Venta is 32-34 meters high (Rice 2007:81) and contains around 100,000 cubic meters of earth fill. Not sure if this is the tallest monument but it was built in the largest regal-ritual centre. This is one of the earliest examples of Mesoamerican pyramids dating to ~400 BCE.

↳ Size of average monument, square meters:

– I don't know

↳ Height of average monument, meters:

– I don't know

↳ In the largest settlement, what percentage of area is taken up by all religious monuments:

– Percentage of area: 70

Notes: Most of the buildings at La Venta (largest regal-ritual centre) were used for religious activities so this percentage is just a rough estimate based on what is known thus far from the archaeological record.

Are there different types of religious monumental architecture:

– Yes

↳ Tombs:

– Yes

↳ Cemeteries:

– No

↳ Temples:

– Yes

Notes: There are platforms present that were likely bases for temples, although the actual temples are no longer present (perhaps these were made out of organic, perishable materials such as wood).

↳ Altars:

– Yes

Notes: In the form of raised platforms such as La Venta's Stirling Acropolis platform.

↳ Devotional markers:

– I don't know

↳ Mass gathering point [plazas, courtyard, square. Places permanently demarcated using visible objects or structures]:

– Yes

↳ Other type of religious monumental architecture:

– Yes [specify]: Ball courts; colossal stone heads

Is iconography present:

– Yes

↳ Where is iconography present [select all that apply]:

– At home

– All public spaces

Notes: Also on portable artifacts (including ritual-related objects), pottery, figurines, and on features such as sculptures.

↳ Are there distinct features in the religious group's iconography:

– Yes

↳ Eyes (stylized or not):

– No

Notes: In some cases like in clay figurines, eyes are left blank.

↳ Supernatural beings (zoomorphic):

– Yes

Notes: Typical Olmec iconographic style involves multiple animals and humans blended together to create mythological creatures that do not exist in the real world. An example of this is the Olmec Dragon (God I), which has been interpreted as a crocodylian with jaguar, eagle, human, and serpent features (Diehl 2005).

↳ Supernatural beings (geomorphic):

– I don't know

↳ Supernatural beings (anthropomorphic):

– Yes

Notes: Mixed with animal characteristics as described above.

↳ Supernatural beings (abstract symbol):

– Yes

Notes: The Olmec Dragon God (God I) has been also illustrated as "schematic symbols that were incised or carved on pottery as well as on stone sculptures" (Reilly III 2012:5).

↳ Portrayals of afterlife:

– I don't know

↳ Aspects of doctrine (e.g. cross, trinity, Mithraic symbols):

– No

↳ Humans:

– Yes

Notes: Mostly elite iconography including rulers. An example are the colossal stone heads.

↳ Other features of iconography:

– Yes

Notes: Figures of individuals playing the religiously-associated Mesoamerican ball game. Also, depictions of infant-looking clay figurines, known as "Olmec babies" (Reilly III 2012).

Are there specific sites dedicated to sacred practice or considered sacred:

– Yes

↳ Are sacred site oriented to environmental features:

"Environmental features" refers to features in the landscape, mountains, rivers, cardinal directions etc...

– Yes

Notes: The Olmec were guided by the four cardinal directions and considered springs, rivers, caves, and mountains sacred.

Are pilgrimages present:

– Yes

↳ How strict is pilgrimage:

– Field doesn't know

Beliefs

Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer "no" only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body.

Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

– Yes

↳ Spirit-mind is conceived of as having qualitatively different powers or properties than other body parts:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Spirit-mind is conceived of as non-material, ontologically distinct from body:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Other spirit-body relationship:

– Field doesn't know

Belief in afterlife:

– Yes

↳ Is the spatial location of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: The Olmec believed in three realms: the sky realm, the physical realm where people live, and the underworld.

↳ Afterlife in specified realm of space beyond this world:

– Yes

↳ Afterlife in vaguely defined "above" space:

– No

↳ Afterlife in vaguely defined "below" space:

– Yes

Notes: There is an "underworld" which is below the terrestrial realm.

↳ Afterlife located in "other" space:

– No

Reincarnation in this world:

– No

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

– Yes

Notes: Examples from the archaeological site of La Venta.

↳ Interment:

– Yes

Notes: Examples present from the archaeological site of La Venta.

↳ Corpse is interred some other way:

– Yes [specify]: inside clay pots known as "urn burials"

↳ Other intensive (in terms of time or resources expended) treatment of corpse :

– Yes [specify]: possible wrapping of individuals in bundles and covered in a red pigment (cinnabar), which may have denoted status.

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

– Yes

↳ Human sacrifices present:

– Yes

↳ Out-group humans are sacrificed:

– Yes

Notes: war captives, possibly captive rulers and other individuals of high status, merchants.

↳ In-group humans are sacrificed:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Other humans are sacrificed:

– Yes [specify]: child sacrifices

Notes: there is evidence of newborn and unborn skeletons of infants along with dismembered femora and skulls from the sacrificial bog at the Olmec site of El Manatí (Ortíz and Rodríguez 1999).

↳ Animal co-sacrifices present:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: It is not clear if the Olmec sacrificed animals. However, later Mesoamerican cultures did

practice animal sacrifice, particularly sacrificing dogs as these were thought to be animals that would guide the dead to the underworld. It is possible that the Olmec could have engaged in this practice as well, nonetheless, more research must be done on this topic to fully comprehend this practice and assess if it was carried out in Olmec religion.

Are grave goods present:

– Yes

↳ Personal effects:

– Yes

Notes: Jade earspools, beads, pendants, spangles, plaques, and other jewelry found at multiple burial sites. It is not known if many of these items were worn by the individuals or simply placed as burial goods. In the case of jade outfits buried with infants and children, these could have been inherited objects and heirlooms (see Clark and Colman 2013).

↳ Valuable items:

– Yes

↳ Significant wealth (e.g. gold, jade, intensely worked objects):

– Yes

Notes: Jade axes that had been previously used, which indicates that these were deemed as valuables and inalienable goods (particularly the incised and carved axes) (see Clark and Colman 2013).

↳ Some wealth (some valuable or useful objects interred):

– Yes

↳ Other valuable/precious items interred:

– Yes [specify]: Jade beads, earspools, jade clamshell pectorals

↳ Other grave goods:

– Yes

Notes: Objects related to their religious/cosmological beliefs such as shark teeth, stingray spines, iron-ore mirrors, and figurines of jade and serpentine. Also pottery likely used as containers for perishable offerings. The mirrors are only present in a few burials at La Venta and may have been used for persons of the highest statuses (see Clark and Colman 2013).

Are formal burials present:

– Yes

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↳ As cenotaphs:

– No

↳ In cemetery:

– No

↳ Family tomb-crypt:

– No

↳ Domestic (individuals interred beneath house, or in areas used for normal domestic activities):

– Yes

Notes: Most Mesoamerican societies, including the Olmec interred their dead underneath house floors or patios and sometimes on walls. Multiple individuals could be interred in the same burial location.

↳ Other formal burial type:

– Yes [specify]: Cremation

Notes: Cremation was a common burial practice in Mesoamerican societies, particularly for the elites.

Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

– Yes

↳ A supreme high god is present:

– No

Notes: There is no one supreme high god, however, there are multiple high gods or supernatural forces present. There are six recognizable deities named God I through God VI. The most commonly depicted in Olmec art are God I or "Olmec Dragon" and God III or "Olmec Bird Monster" or "Were-jaguar" (Diehl 2005). God II is the Maize deity, God IV is the Branded-eye deity, God V is the Feathered Serpent, and God VI is the Fish or Shark Monster deity.

↳ Previously human spirits are present:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Non-human supernatural beings are present:

– Yes

↳ These supernatural beings can be seen:

– No

↳ These supernatural beings can be physically felt:

– Yes

Notes: They were likely felt when shamans and priests carried out ritual ceremonies and incantations that would allow them to cross the cosmos and interact with the supernatural beings/forces.

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have knowledge of this world:

– Yes

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have knowledge restricted to particular domain of human affairs:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have knowledge restricted to (a) specific area(s) within the sample region:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have knowledge unrestricted within the sample region:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have knowledge unrestricted outside of sample region:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Non-human supernatural beings can see you everywhere normally visible (in public):

– Field doesn't know

↳ Non-human supernatural beings can see you everywhere (in the dark, at home):

– Field doesn't know

↳ Non-human supernatural beings can see inside heart/mind (hidden motives):

– Field doesn't know

- ↳ Non-human supernatural beings know your basic character (personal essence):
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Non-human supernatural beings know what will happen to you, what you will do (future sight):
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Non-human supernatural beings have other knowledge of this world:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Non-human supernatural beings have deliberate causal efficacy in the world:
 - Yes
 - Notes: Supernatural forces control the universe.
- ↳ These supernatural beings can reward:
 - Yes
- ↳ These supernatural beings can punish:
 - Yes
- ↳ These supernatural beings have indirect causal efficacy in the world:
 - Yes
- ↳ These supernatural beings exhibit positive emotion:
 - Yes
- ↳ These supernatural beings exhibit negative emotion:
 - Yes
- ↳ These supernatural beings possess hunger:
 - I don't know
- ↳ These supernatural beings possess/exhibit some other feature:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Mixed human-divine beings are present:

– Yes

Notes: Olmec deities/supernatural forces combine human and non-human physical features as seen depicted in artifacts and iconography.

↳ Does the religious group possess a variety of supernatural beings:

– Yes

Notes: There is evidence early on (1790-1760 BCE) at the site of El Manatí of the worship of natural elements such as water and springs, hills which bring the clouds and rain, and the possible communication with the ancestors based on the artifacts deposited (Rice 2007:79).

↳ Organized by kinship based on a family model:

– No

↳ Organized hierarchically:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Power of beings is domain specific:

– Yes

Notes: Each supernatural being or deity would be in charge of an aspect of the natural world such as fertility, maize (agriculture), rain, fire, and so forth.

↳ Other organization for pantheon:

– Yes [specify]: Based on what is present in nature: water, hills, fire, clouds and rain, maize, etc.

Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present:

This refers to surveillance by supernatural beings of humans' behaviour and/or thought particularly as it relates to social norms or potential norm violations.

– Yes

Notes: Based on the fact that the Olmec people carried out rituals to make requests to the deities in relation to specific purposes including: requesting for rain/fertility, agricultural success (e.g., maize). This implies the deities were constantly monitoring human behavior and the natural environment. Also, there was communication with the deities via shamanistic practices.

↳ There is supernatural monitoring of prosocial norm adherence in particular:

Prosocial norms are norms that enhance cooperation among members of the group, including obviously "moral" or "ethical" norms, but also extending to norms concerning honouring contracts and oaths, providing hospitality, coming to mutual aid in emergencies, etc.

- Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about taboos:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about murder of coreligionists:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about murder of members of other religions:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about murder of members of other polities:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about sex:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about lying:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about honouring oaths:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about laziness:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about sorcery:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about non-lethal fighting:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about shirking risk:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural beings care about disrespecting elders:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Supernatural beings care about gossiping:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Supernatural beings care about property crimes:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Supernatural beings care about proper ritual observance:

– Yes

Notes: The Olmec had shamans and priests who carried out specific rituals so this implies that these rituals had to be held properly for the supernatural beings/deities to respond and interact with the humans in such rituals.

↳ Supernatural beings care about performance of rituals:

– Yes

Notes: This is likely the case since the Olmec assigned specific individuals (i.e., priests) to carry out rituals so that they would be performed in a specific manner.

↳ Supernatural beings care about conversion of non-religionists:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Supernatural beings care about economic fairness:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Supernatural beings care about personal hygiene:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Supernatural beings care about other:

– Field doesn't know

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

– Yes

↳ Is the cause or agent of supernatural punishment known:

– Field doesn't know

- ↳ Is the reason for supernatural punishment known:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural punishments are meted out in the afterlife:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural punishments are meted out in this lifetime:
 - Field doesn't know

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards:

– Yes

- ↳ Is the cause/purpose of supernatural rewards known:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in the afterlife:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in this lifetime:
 - Field doesn't know

Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present:

– No

Is an eschatology present:

– Field doesn't know

Norms and Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the religious group:

– Field doesn't know

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious group:

– Field doesn't know

Practices

Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require celibacy (full sexual abstinence):

– No

Does membership in this religious group require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence):

– No

Does membership in this religious group require castration:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require fasting:

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods):

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations:

– Yes

Notes: As with other Mesoamerican religions, the Olmec would have made self-sacrifice an important aspect of their religious practices. It would have involved piercing parts of the body with bone or obsidian objects to let blood flow as a form of self-sacrifice.

Does membership in this religious group require painful physical positions or transitory painful wounds:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:

"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– Yes



Commoners:

– Yes



Other:

– Yes [specify]: Ball game players who lost the match.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:

"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– Yes

Notes: Infant skeletal remains associated with sacrificial offerings have been found at the site of El Manatí. Also shown iconographically in Olmec art portraying limp "were-jaguar" babies (e.g., La Venta's Altar 5).

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of property/valuable items:

– Yes



To other in-group members:

– Field doesn't know



To out-groups:

– Field doesn't know



Destroyed:

– I don't know



Other:

– Yes [specify]: Valuable items were placed in ritual offerings.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of time (e.g., attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.):

– Yes

Notes: Olmec people would have attended ritual ceremonies at the main regal-ritual centres from time to time that would have been held at the main plazas and raised platforms at the centres.

Does membership in this religious group require physical risk taking:

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require accepting ethical precepts:

– Yes

Does membership in this religious group require marginalization by out-group members:

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household):

– Yes



What is the average interval of time between performances (in hours):

Performances here refers to small-scale rituals.

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:

i.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale “ceremonies” and “festivals.”

– Yes



On average, for large-scale rituals how many participants gather in one location:

– Number of participants: 2000



What is the average interval of time between performances (in hours):

Performances here refers to large-scale rituals.

– Field doesn't know



Are there orthodoxy checks:

Orthodoxy checks are mechanisms used to ensure that rituals are interpreted in a standardized way, e.g. through the supervisory prominence of a professionalized priesthood or other system of governance, appeal to texts detailing the proper interpretation, etc.

– Yes

Notes: The ceremonies were performed by the rulers, full-time priests, and shamans.



Are there orthopraxy checks:

Orthopraxy checks are mechanisms used to ensure that rituals are performed in a standardized way, e.g. through the supervisory prominence of a professionalized priesthood or other system of governance, appeal to texts detailing the proper procedure, etc.

– Yes

Notes: Same as above question.



Does participation entail synchronic practices:

– Yes

Notes: Later Mesoamerican groups engaged in synchronic practices so it is very likely that this was the case for the Olmecs as well. They developed these religious centres where people would congregate and engage in rituals as a group, likely participating synchronically in such rituals.



Is there use of intoxicants:

– Yes

Notes: It is likely that shamans were in charge of this aspect of the ceremonies. According to Peter T. Furst some Olmec objects "portray the theme of a 'jaguar-shaman transformation complex' in which human shamans are assumed the guise of their jaguar alter egos" (Diehl 2005:6818).

Are extra-ritual in-group markers present:

E.g. special changes to appearance such as circumcision, tattoos, scarification, etc.

– Field doesn't know

Does the group employ fictive kinship terminology:

– Field doesn't know

Society and Institutions

Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):

– A chiefdom

Welfare

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized famine relief:

– Field doesn't know

Is famine relief available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized poverty relief:

– Field doesn't know

Is poverty relief available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm:

– Field doesn't know

Is institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Education

Does the religious group provide formal education to its adherents:

– Yes

↳ Is formal education restricted to religious professionals:

– Yes

↳ Is such education open to both males and females:

– No

Is formal education available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group:

– Yes

↳ Is extra-religious education open to both males and females:

– Yes

Notes: Education was varied depending on sex, thus men and women were educated differently within the society. Men could become merchants, builders, artists, warriors. Women learned to prepare food and grind maize.

Bureaucracy

Do the group's adherents interact with a formal bureaucracy within their group:

– No

Do the group's adherents interact with other institutional bureaucracies:

– No

Public Works

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

– No

Notes: Commoners living in small villages surrounding the regal-ritual centres built homes and they would store their own food underneath their house floors. They used ceramic vessels for food storage.

Is public food storage provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question provide water management (irrigation, flood control):

– Yes

Notes: There is archaeological evidence of an aqueduct that delivered spring water to the people at the site of San Lorenzo. There were twenty ponds or lagoons and a system of drains. It is possible that the lagoon and canal structures could have been used for water storage or ritual baths and/or to carry away rainwater (Rice 2007:79).

Is water management provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Since the elite encompassed the rulers and priests, it is likely that the institutions contributed to managing the water system. Ann Cyphers "hypothesizes that the foundation of San Lorenzo's rulers' power was water management, with the water perhaps drawn from a spring at the upper (east) end of the canals, thereby supplying potable water from a spring for ritual and quotidian use, as well as control of labor" (Rice 2007:79). See also notes on question above.

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

– No

Is transportation infrastructure provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Taxation

Does the religious group in question levy taxes or tithes:

– Field doesn't know

Are taxes levied on the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: While it is not clear if the Olmec elites levied taxes on the rest of the population, it is possible that they levied taxes while controlling river transport (Pool 2007:105). Also, hundreds of commoners would have been required to transport the raw material as well as the finalized colossal stone heads (Porter Weaver 1993:58) but it is not clear if this labor was a form of taxation by the Olmec elites.

Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:

– No

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized police force provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:

– Field doesn't know

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized judicial system provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:

– Field doesn't know

Are the group's adherents subject to institutionalized punishment enforced by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: While later Mesoamerican societies (like the Mexica-Aztec) used to enforce punishment of criminals, gamblers, drunks, etc. at the institutional level, it remains unclear if the Olmec used to do this during the Formative period.

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:

– Field doesn't know

Are the group's adherents subject to a formal legal code provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Warfare

Does religious group in question possess an institutionalized military:

– No

Do the group's adherents participate in an institutionalized military provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Are the group's adherents protected by or subject to an institutionalized military provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Written Language

Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:

– Yes

Notes: The earliest evidence of Olmec writing comes from the site of San Andrés and involves a cylinder seal and a greenstone plaque with glyphs dating to 650 BCE (Pohl et al. 2002). There is also evidence of the Olmec on the road to writing from the symbols depicted on the Cascajal Block (900 BCE), a 15 inch long block made of green serpentine (Reilly III 2012).



Is use of this distinct written language confined to religious professionals:

– Yes

Notes: Most likely only the elite, including the priesthood, would have access to learning the written language.

Is a non-religion-specific written language available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Is a non-religion-specific written language used by the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Calendar

Does the religious group in question possess a formal calendar:

– Yes

Notes: The earliest evidence of Mesoamerican calendrics comes from the archaeological site of San Andrés (subsidiary elite Olmec site within La Venta's sociopolitical network). Pohl et al. (2002) recovered a cylinder seal and a greenstone plaque with glyphs dating to ~650 BCE. The calendar system would have involved a sacred 260-day calendar (associated with Venus and the lunar cycle) and a 360/365-day calendar (Long Count), important ritually as well for the Epi-Olmec and as the structural foundation of the solar calendar (Rice 2007:39).

Is a formal calendar provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: Religion and sociopolitical institutions were very much tied together in most Mesoamerican societies, including the Olmec, so the institutions would have also used these calendar systems for agricultural cycles and other more economically and sociopolitically based activities.

Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:

– Yes



Please characterize the forms/level of food production [choose all that apply]:

– Gathering

– Hunting (including marine animals)

– Large-scale agriculture (e.g., monocropping, organized irrigation systems)

Notes: The Olmec were an agricultural society so time was really important for the agricultural cycle. Maize (*Zea mays*) was a staple crop at this point in time and played a deeply crucial role in social and cultural development. The Olmec had a Maize God (Good II; see Taube 1996). The Olmec lived a wetland environment with fertile alluvial soils, salt domes, and a range of terrestrial and avian fauna were available for consumption as well as fish, shellfish, and reptiles (Rice 2007).

Is food provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

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